

REV. D. LANGLANDS SEATH, B. D., J. P.. IMMORTAL MEMORY — 1939

The Chairman (Mr. John G. Mackenzie), in welcoming the company, said it was his proud privilege to do so, and very especially to welcome the guest of the evening, Rev. D. L. Seath. As a humble admirer of the bard, it was one of the pleasures of his leisure, as it was of theirs, to learn a few words of comfort and counsel from the works of their inimitable Rabble, but it was a special treat to sit once a year at the feet of such authorities as their guest and to hear the distilled wisdom and sweetness of the poet presented as only those who had dwelt long and thoughtfully with him could. Of all the meeting places of those who gathered together on that historic evening, to honour the bard, the one in which they were assembled was foremost in significance and suggestiveness. If, through the help of their speaker, they could re—create the old—time atmosphere of the place, it would not be difficult to imagine Robbie with the flashing eye and the nimble wit as one of their guests, and it would not be difficult to imagine the magic cadence of his voice. To tread the very floors he trod, and occasionally to sit in the very seats he sat in, was indeed a privilege, and it was with due humility he took his place that night at the head of the table. Their might be grander clubs than theirs, their might be concourses of more scholarly men, but assuredly there could be no meeting in which the members paid more reverent homage and in which hearts beat in more perfect unison with that of him whom they would honour. They met in thankfulness for the heritage which Burns gave to his brother Scots, and in thankful appreciation of all he had meant to each of them in their daily lives. Burns was the poet most appropriate to every circumstance of life, be it joy or sorrow, love or longing. Burns' poetry rang true on the touchstone of experience, and that was why it appealed to common men and women of every age. Happy was Scotland in her poetry, and long might her sons and daughters pay tribute at the shrine of him who transmuted common experience into enduring words.

The Rev. D. Langlands Seath, in proposing the toast of the "Immortal Memory," said:—

May I in the first place express my keen appreciation of the honour you have done me in asking me to be your speaker to—night, to propose the "Immortal Memory" at this famous Burns' Club and in this historic town of Dumfries, Queen of the South. I recollect, of course, a letter of Burns, where he says:—"This will be delivered to you by a Mrs. Hyslop, landlady of the Globe Tavern, which, for these many years, has been my Howff." And again, in trying to negotiate the sale of Friar's Carse:—"Here is positively the most beautiful spot in the low—lands of Scotland, absolutely the masterpiece of Nature in that part of the Kingdom — within six miles of the third town for importance and elegance in Scotland." For almost the whole of the calendar year you could make no such claim to—day, but per—haps on this night of nights, you may justly claim that you are important, and from what I have seen to—day, still elegant. The celebration of our national bard has this year a special significance. We are not unmindful of a crisis that stirred us all very deeply, and we are not unaware of the fact that the threat to our free institutions has not been yet disposed of. To dogmatise as to what Burns might or would say at any given juncture in our day and generation, has its hazards, but surely we are entitled to say that his voice and pen would have been active — active in the passionate Burns way — against a totalitarian philosophy and the propounding of a racial theory, so diametrically opposed to his own ideals of free—dom, social justice, and to his strongly held belief in the value of the individual man in the scheme of the state. You remember how he wrote to Erskine, Earl of Mar, who was prepared to head a fund for Burns if his strongly expressed democratic sentiments — by toasts in the Globe and letters to the press — had led to his

dis-missal from the Excise. "Does any man tell me my feeble efforts can be of no ser-vice and that it does not belong to my humble station to meddle with the concerns of a people? — I tell him that it is on such individuals as I, that for the hand of support and the eye of intelligence, a nation has to rest." It was to that same period when it seemed that the heralds of a new age were proclaiming liberty, equal-ity and fraternity that we owe the glorious soul—stirring song, so perfectly set to an old tune, "Scots Wha Hae," and, that no less glorious expression of his ideal — that happiness should be accessible to all honest men — the anthem of international brotherhood, "A man's a man for a' that." Burns joined the Volunteer Corps in Dumfries — it satisfied himself and was a gesture to his superiors — and immediately came, in "Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat," an expression of democracy under a limited monarchy that is worth recalling in these troubled days:—

"The wretch that would a tyrant own,  
    And the wretch his true born brother,  
Who would set the mob aboon the throne,  
    May they be damn'd together.  
Who will not sing "God Save the King"  
    Shall hang as high's the Steeple,  
But while we sing "God Save the King"  
    We'll ne'er forget the people."

In this old country of ours we hold by that — we desire neither the rule of the tyrant nor mob — we stand by the Throne and the will of the people. If Burns, internationally, would be disturbed to—day by "Man's inhumanity to man," he would be no less disturbed by our failure to cope with a phase of that self—same inhumanity. I refer to the problem of unemployment which, amid rumours of war, and preparations for security, is conveniently forgotten. You will remember, perhaps, young Robert was the leading light in the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club. The last paragraph of its constitution, framed by him, reads as follows:— "In short, the proper person for this society is a cheerful, honest—hearted lad who if he has a friend that is kind and as much genteely to make both ends meet, is as happy as this world can make him." Burns' early memories of the struggle to make both ends meet at Mount Oliphant and Lochlea had a tinge of bitter-ness, and this fear of poverty haunted him to his last days. Enough to do one's turn seemed indispensable and essential to him, and I am sure the plight of those, who through no fault of their own, find it a grim business to make ends meet would have moved his heart and inspired his muse. That is very far from saying that he would have been a Socialist politician, for feelings of humanity and benevolence are the common possession of every honest man. I like the words of a letter Burns wrote to Fergusson of Craigdarroch, Justice of the Peace, and wrote it from the Globe Inn one Wednesday morning 150 years ago, asking consideration for a poor man Robbie Gordon. "I know benevolence is supreme in your honour, and has the first voice and last check, in all you do." That is true of Burns himself no less than Fergusson. Thirty—seven years. was a brief life for one in whom was the divine fire. There has inevitably been speculation as to what Burns might have accomplished had the run of his years been nearer the normal. He wrote a prologue spoken by Mr. Sutherland, in the Theatre, Dumfries, which had these lines:—

"Is there no daring bard will rise and tell  
    How glorious Wallace stood, how hapless, fell?  
    Where are the muses fled that could produce  
    A drama worthy o' the name o' Bruce?  
    How here, even here, he first unsheath'd the sword

'Gainst mighty England and his guilty lords;  
And after mony a bloody deathless doing,  
Wrench'd his dear country from the jaws of ruin:  
O for a Shakespeare or an Otway scene  
To draw the lovely, hapless Scottish Queen:"

It has been said, therefore, that we might have had, in view of these lines, a great Scottish drama on a great theme, Wallace, or Bruce, or Mary Queen of Scots. This is very much in the realm of speculation. We are on much surer and safer ground in saying that had he lived on, there would not have been an old Scots tune left which did not have words — and the perfect words — fitted to it by our bard. It is sometimes suggested that the orator should leave the song to the singer. Can one do that in remembering how Burns has preserved for us our heritage of Scottish folk—song, and how, in these last years in Dumfries, when the ignorant and unversed in the record, allege he was broken down, dissolute, and his genius departed from him? How, I say, he laboured incessantly — it was a labour of love — it was a passion — to make old songs new, to give old tunes a permanent setting, to make the perfect blend of words and music. These songs are our proud possession. They breathe of the spirit and soul of Scotland. But further, I believe, he might well have advanced further into a region that has only one poem, but that a masterpiece. Burns himself says that just as in a certain species of manufacture his chief— d'oeuvre was the bairn to whom Mrs. Dunlop was Godmother, so in poetical achievement his masterpiece was "Tam o Shanter." It is admitted that we are very unreliable critics when it is our own work that is under review, but the author's estimate of "Tam o' Shanter" will find a large measure of agreement in many minds.

As a poetic tale it is incomparable, and the joy in the reading and hearing of it never fails. To create Tam o' Shanter, Souter Johnny, Kirkton Jean, Smith, and Miller was an achievement of the highest distinction, and the semi—supernatural setting is superb imagination. I would like to think that Burns would have extended further into this particular field and have given us comparable tales in which the genius of his imagination would have played with this particular store of knowledge — i.e. devils, ghosts, witches, warlocks, etc.. But "Tam o' Shanter" is alone on a pinnacle of his temple of fame. And we cannot be too grateful, just as we can never forget "Tam o' Shanter" and his mare.

A Glasgow Councillor has been decrying those who, he asserts, haver about the philosophy of Burns and who have never heard of Hume. There is a philosophy of first causes of which most ordinary men and women do readily confess their ignorance, but there is a philosophy of life and living which has found expression in Burns which they know and in which they rejoice. It is centred in the heart, and Burns has made articulate out of the warmth of his own heart what is inarticulate in all of us. It is the heart benevolent and kind that most resembles God — it is the heart that must guide our judgment, for "the heart's aye the pairt aye that mak's us right or wrang." Thus shall we "gently scan our brother man and still gentler sister woman." That definition of status for his Tarbolton Bachelors' Club is an early key to his ideal. "The cheerful honest—hearted lad who if he has a friend that is true and a mistress that is kind is as happy as this world can make him." The loyal friendships and warm loves among honest men and bonnie lasses — therein lies a way of happiness, therein lies the true cronie spirit that was his strong characteristic to the end. His God, likewise, would look upon the heart and would not mete out — "a' for His glory" — the punishment of a Hell to the frailties of the flesh. As God, so the man. In a

letter to Hill, the bookseller, we find :— God knows I am no Saint — I have a whole host of sins and follies to answer for — but if I could and I believe I do it as often as I can, I would wipe away all tears from all eyes." If our own philosophy or religion leads us thus far, we are not unworthy of our Creator. Burns has declared he was particularly susceptible to astronomical influences at Lammas. So it was a Lammas night that was responsible for this fine confession of his ways and insight into his thoughts:—

"I hae been blythe wi' comrades dear;  
I hae been merry drinking;  
I hae been joyfu' gatherin, gear,  
I hae been happy thinking.  
But a' the pleasures e'er I saw,  
Tho' three times doubl'd fairly,  
That happy night was worth them a',  
Amang the rigs o barley."

I read a little Hume at my University — I have read a great deal of Burns since, and I am not unhappy that my knowledge of the Poet is greater than my knowledge of the Philosopher. I believe Burns had just come to the fullness of his powers in Dumfries, and the fact that he passed away so soon like the lily of a day is a source of infinite regret. Against that it may be urged that his life was long enough to ensure that his own prophecy came true:—

"He'll hae misfortunes great and sma',  
But aye a heart aboon them a',  
He'll be a credit to us a' —  
We'll a' be proud o' Robin."

He is so great a credit that words are poor agencies for our feelings. To quote a phrase of his awn to John Francis Erskine of Mar we confess rather "the silent throb of gratitude." That we're a' proud o' Robin is true for individual and people. He is Scotland's great pride. His life was long enough to ensure that a deeply cherished desire had fruition:—

"Gae me ae spark o' Nature's fire,  
That's a' the learning I desire,  
Then tho' I drudge thro' dub and mire,  
At plough or cart,  
My muse, tho' hamely in attire,  
May touch the heart."

So in the kirkyard here is his resting place. On that July morning after commital I should like to think that the sun rose early and shone in undimmed splendour that day as a symbol of that sun of immortality that can never set on name or fame of Robert Burns, for, where Scotsmen are, and they are everywhere, in our far—flung Empire, and throughout the whole world they do not, cannot, forget this memory that is immortal. I give you the "Immortal Memory of Robert Burns," our national bard.

